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Opinion

Why We Published the Tom Cotton Op-Ed

More on our decision.



By James Bennet

June 4, 2020



This article is part of the Opinion Today newsletter. This is the type of insight into The New York Times Opinion section that you'll find in this daily email. [You can receive it here.](#)

We published a piece yesterday that angered many readers, including many of my colleagues here at The Times. It was an [argument](#) by Senator Tom Cotton of Arkansas in favor of using federal troops to stop the looting and violence that accompanied some protests in recent days.

I addressed our decision to publish the Op-Ed [on Twitter yesterday](#), but because I thought this might be on your mind, and because it's certainly weighing on my own, I thought I should write about it here as well.

I strongly oppose the idea of using federal troops. My position on this is reflected in that of The Times's editorial board, which has criticized the president's use of federal forces in Washington, D.C., fiercely defended the protesters as patriots, and [condemned police brutality](#) and called for thoroughgoing reforms. The board [warned](#) this week that the First Amendment is already under assault from the abuses the police have committed against peaceful protesters and journalists trying to do their jobs.

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Nick Kristof [writes](#), “Trump’s deployment of troops for political purposes would betray our traditions, damage the credibility of the armed forces and exacerbate tensions across the country.”

Yesterday we also published a piece by Jonathan Stevenson, a former staff member of the National Security Council, [arguing that](#) the legal basis for calling out the troops is shaky. He also argued that Donald Trump wants to use the military as “the ultimate martial prop,” and I suspect he’s right about that, too.

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That piece built on others we’ve published in recent days calling for [the police to be defunded](#), praising [the power of protest](#) to bring about necessary change and [urging prosecutors](#) to get tough with [abusive police](#).

We published Cotton’s argument in part because we’ve committed to Times readers to provide a debate on important questions like this. It would undermine the integrity and independence of The New York Times if we only published views that editors like me agreed with, and it would betray what I think of as our fundamental purpose — not to tell you what to think, but to help you think for yourself.

But that probably just sounds platitudinous, particularly at a fragile moment like this in our national life. And it doesn’t address [specific concerns](#) about our publishing this piece.

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One of those concerns is that we legitimated Cotton’s point of view by publishing it in The Times. That’s a category of concern we’ve worried about often, particularly in cases when we’ve published pieces by terrorists with blood on their hands or authoritarian leaders with dissidents in jail. It’s never an easy call, and this is never a criticism to be ignored or dismissed lightly.

But, in this case, I worry we’d be misleading our readers if we [concluded that by ignoring Cotton’s argument we would diminish](#)

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Cotton, a Republican and a combat veteran, serves on the Senate Armed Services Committee and the Select Committee on Intelligence. He has a direct line to the White House, and he's a likely presidential candidate in the future. What he thinks may very well become government policy, which means it demands interrogation.

Another criticism, though, is precisely that because Cotton is a senator he doesn't lack means to make his views known — and in fact he already has, over Twitter. That's true. But I think having to stand up an argument in an essay is very different than making a point in a tweet. And while Cotton could have made this argument at length in another venue, Times readers might not have been introduced to it and been able to challenge it.

But that response, again, only leads to a further criticism: That Times Opinion should have left it to the Times newsroom to write a news story about Cotton's views. A news reporter, summarizing Cotton's position, could add important context and juxtapose his views with those of others rebutting him.

That points to a general hazard for Times Opinion journalism, particularly in the digital era. While we aspire to convene debate, each piece goes out onto the internet as its own unit of argument, rather than contextualized within the running back-and-forth we are curating in aggregate. We try to overcome this problem by, for example, highlighting links among arguments that clash. We did this yesterday with Cotton's piece by linking it to Stevenson's and to the editorial. We've also added more detail to author identifications in hopes of providing further context for their views. I've started writing this newsletter in another effort to provide such context.

But when it comes to supplying context, none of that is as effective as a reporter's ability to dispassionately present a range of voices, combined with other reporting, within a single article. It is a deep challenge we're working on but haven't solved. It is, of course, fundamental to the value of our work that we let each individual voice stand on its own. But particularly in this period of fear for the country's future — particularly at this moment, when so many feel so vulnerable — a reader encountering an atomized argument they profoundly disagree with can feel betrayed and appalled.

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And that leads me to a concern that's being expressed within The Times: A fear that we have endangered our colleagues, and specifically our African-American colleagues, by publishing Cotton's Op-Ed.

There's no concern I could take more seriously than that. And in the face of the fear that lives are at stake, arguments like some I made above about the principles of Times Opinion must sound particularly fatuous. For generations black Americans have been victims of abuse by the police, and I share the fear that sending more troops into our streets would lead to more cruelty.

Cotton and others in power are advocating the use of the military, and I believe the public would be better equipped to push back if it heard the argument and had the chance to respond to the reasoning. Readers who might be inclined to oppose Cotton's position need to be fully aware of it, and reckon with it, if they hope to defeat it. To me, debating influential ideas openly, rather than letting them go unchallenged, is far more likely to help society reach the right answers.

But it is impossible to feel righteous about any of this. I know that my own view may be wrong.

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James Bennet, the editorial page editor since 2016, oversees the editorial board and the Letters and Op-Ed sections. He was previously the editor in chief of The Atlantic and, before that, worked as a correspondent for The Times for 15 years.



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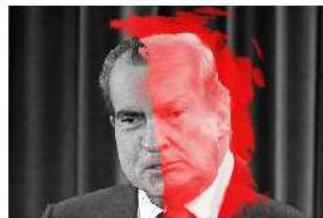


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